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Bill on minors, liquor running out of time

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Lt. Gov. James "Duke" Aiona criticized House Judiciary Chairwoman Sylvia Luke yesterday for failing to hold a hearing on a bill that would suspend the driver's licenses of minors convicted of possessing alcohol.

The bill needs to move out of the Judiciary Committee by 10 p.m. today in order to have a chance of becoming law this session. Sponsored by the Lingle administration, the bill has been approved in the Senate and has advanced out of the House Transportation Committee.

The bill requires a judge to suspend for 180 days the driver's license of those under 21 who have been convicted illegal possession of alcohol, regardless of whether a violation occurred in a vehicle. Exceptions could be made by a judge for a minor who needs to drive to and from school or work. Minors not yet licensed would have to wait 180 days or until age 17, whichever is longer, before seeking a license.

Aiona said he is baffled by Luke's decision. "We have studies which show that if you start drinking after the age of 21, your chances of developing some kind of dependency or addiction to alcohol is decreased by 70 percent," he said.

His comments came at a news conference just prior to proclaiming April as Alcohol Awareness Month in the state. A number of those gathered for the proclamation said they support the bill, including University of Hawai'i interim President David McClain, Honolulu police and Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Also on hand were two seniors at Lana'i High School who made news last month when they refused to drink when alcohol was offered by their coaches. The two coaches were fired and nine other players were released.

"If this bill is passed, teenagers would think twice before they drink," said Kristy Ayudan, 17, one of the two girls.

Luke, D-26th (Punchbowl, Pacific Heights), said it was unfair for Aiona to look solely at one bill when her committee and the Legislature have looked at several others related to drinking and youth.

The bill is flawed, she said, noting that it might even include a juvenile taking a sip of champagne at a relative's wedding.

She noted that a bill advancing in the Legislature would require a car owner to forfeit his vehicle if convicted of driving under the influence of intoxicants three or more times within five years. Her committee also moved out a bill allowing police to issue citations to minors for a first or second liquor offense, but the measure stalled in another committee.

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